

September 21, 2016



Let's Plant Some Olives!

By Dave Hale

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Lots of decisions await the aspiring olive grower! Do you want to grow table olives, olive oil olives, or just a nice drought-tolerant evergreen without fruit (and fairly low pollen)? The fruit-bearing trees generally fall into either oil or table, with a few growing well for either. Olive oil olives generally are smaller and have a higher percentage of oil, around 23%, whereas table olives are grown for their high flesh-to-pit ratio.

Trivia time: Where do the California Black olives come from? Good question. These olives are picked green, and then they get pumped up with oxygen to turn them black. Their shade then gets fixed with a black chemical compound called ferrous gluconate. But we digress...

Originating from warm Mediterranean regions, olive trees are cold-sensitive. Some varieties can tolerate temperatures to 23 degrees, but all will perish below 15 degrees, without protection. If the area where you plan to grow olives sees temperatures that low, you may want to consider growing trees in containers that can be brought into protection from the cold.

So many varieties to choose from! Some olive trees require other olive varieties for cross-pollination. Others may be self-pollinating. Your nursery can help you choose compatible trees for your orchard.

While olives are drought-tolerant, they will require irrigation -- especially as new plantings. Newly-planted trees require more frequent watering than older trees in order to help them establish their roots.

Weed control in olive orchards enhances the development of newly planted trees and improves the growth and yield of established trees. A weed management program should start before trees are planted.

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When planning the layout of your orchard, keep in mind that sunlight penetration and air flow will optimize tree health and crop yield. A North-South row orientation is ideal, as the sun tracks East to West. A typical layout of an olive orchard is 20 feet between rows, and 16 feet between trees. That spacing over an acre will support 136 trees -- phew!

Plan for vertebrate pests: you will need a deer fence. Olives are not deer resistant! Also, when you plant your trees, you may want to place the root ball inside a metal mesh cage to ward off the pocket gophers. If you live in El Dorado County, chances are good that you will have them!

Pruning olive trees is generally not necessary for the first two years. As trees mature and the foliage becomes thicker, airflow will be reduced, and a disease known as Black Scale may develop, indicating that the tree needs to be thinned out. Pruning also helps control scale.

Once trees begin developing fruit, it is important to remove all of the olives from the orchard (both in the trees, and on the ground) in order to prevent the olive fruit fly from getting a foothold in your orchard. First recorded in California in 1998, the fruit fly now occurs in all olive growing areas of California. There are no known effective biological controls for the fruit fly -- only traps or sprays can manage the pest. It is best to avoid the fly by removing all fruit at harvest time.

Fall is the preferred time to plant olive trees, with spring time a close second. So, what are you waiting for? Buzz on down to your local nursery and get some olives going!

Learn more about growing and preserving olives at today's Sept 21 Master Gardener-Master Food Preserver free class: Olives from Garden to Table. Instructors will show you everything need to get started in the garden, followed by yummy recipes after the harvest. The three-hour class begins at 9:00 a.m., Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive in Cameron Park.

Come one, come all to the Master Gardener Fall Plant Sale, Saturday Sept 24 from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at Sherwood Demonstration Garden, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville. An abundance of perennials, natives, and succulents grown by master gardeners are available at great prices. Cash or check only, please.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.

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